

Colossians 2:16-17

By John K. McKee

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“Therefore let no one act as your judge regarding eating or drinking or in respect to a festival or a New Moon or a Sabbath, things which are a shadow of what is to come, and the substance of which is found in Messiah” (Colossians 2:16).

Many Christians eagerly tell us that the “Old Testament feasts” were but “a mere shadow of what is to come” (NASB) and that they are no longer important. The NASB translators took a serious liberty here and placed mere in italics, meaning that the word was not originally in the Greek text. The placement of mere in the English text is not even implied by the context of the sentence, unlike an understood verb or article that was not written by the original author and could legitimately be written in italics. A more accurate Christians translation of verse 17 comes from the NKJV, which tells us that the feasts “are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.” When we understand that the substance, soma (soma),⁴ or true meaning of the Biblical feasts is found in Messiah, and we honor Him in them and what He has done, we honor both Yahweh’s commandments in Vayikra (Leviticus) 23 and we honor the life of our Redeemer. We do things the way that He originally intended them to be.

When we understand the context of Paul’s writing to the Colossian Believers, it perhaps will make more sense to us to honor the Biblical feasts of Vayikra (Leviticus) 23, rather than to shun them. If the non-Jewish Colossian Believers were following the mandate handed down by the Jerusalem Council, then we should assume that they were honoring the Biblical Sabbath by attending synagogue, and were likewise honoring the Biblical feasts. It is important that we realize this because in Colossians 2:8 Paul tells them “See to it that no one carries you off as a spoil through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Messiah.”

Paul is warning the Colossians not to be deceived by the false and vain philosophies of the heathen Greeks around them. This is most evident because in Colossians 2:9 he writes, “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.” The Colossian Believers were no doubt being persuaded by those around them against the Deity of Messiah and Biblical practices.

Are the feasts of Vayikra/Leviticus23 “according to the tradition of men”? Certainly not. They are, rather, “the designated times of YHVH” (Vayikra/Leviticus 23:4, CJB). It makes much more sense to realize that the Apostle Paul tells the Colossians not to let the heathen Greeks around them judge them for honoring the Biblical holidays, dietary requirements, new moon festivals, and the Biblical Sabbath. The Jerusalem Council plainly ruled in Acts 15 that the non-Jews coming to faith were expected to go to the

synagogue and learn the Torah—a critical part of which is understanding the Biblical appointments.

The Biblical feasts first commemorate events that occurred in the life of Ancient Israel. But Colossians 2:17 adds another imperative dimension to them: “the substance of which is found in Messiah.” The true meaning and fulfillment of the Sabbath, new moon, and Biblical feasts is found in Messiah Yeshua. The Biblical feasts explain the pattern of Messiah’s life and the plan of redemption and His Second Coming.

Passover represents Yeshua’s sacrifice for our sin and His covering as the perfect Lamb of God. Unleavened Bread represents the hardships and pain He had to endure for us, for matzah is flattened bread with “scourges” on it. First Fruits is indicative of His glorious resurrection from the dead. At Pentecost we remember the Holy Spirit being poured out in the Upper Room, just as the Torah had been given to Ancient Israel. The Feast of Trumpets prophetically represents Yeshua’s Second Coming and our gathering to meet Him in the clouds. The Day of Atonement causes us to become somber as we turn to Him and are reminded of the future Day of the Lord when Yeshua defeats His enemies at Armageddon. The Feast of Tabernacles encourages us to look forward to the establishment of His Millennial Kingdom on Earth, and it should remind us of the likewise remind us of the birth of Yeshua Who tabernacled us at this time.